RATIONAL EXPLANATION : MAGIC AND BUNGLED ACTIONS

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By

PREETI

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CERTIFICATE

This is to certify that the thesis 'Rational Explanation: Magic and Bungled Actions' submitted by Preeti in partial fulfilment of the degree of Master of Philosophy to the Department of Humanities and Social Sciences, Indian Institute of Technology, Kanpur, is a record of bonafide research under my administrative supervision. It has not been submitted to any other University or Institute for the award of any degree or diploma.

July, 1980

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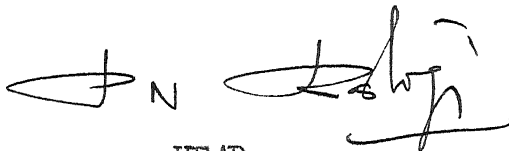
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ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

ABSTRACT

<u>Rational</u> <u>Explanation</u>: <u>Magic</u> <u>and</u> <u>Bungled</u> <u>Actions</u>

Man is born with an insatiable thirst and a deep
curiosity to learn the mind and matter that surrounds
him. The function of learning, understanding and
explaining continually in process in all human beings.
The moment one comes across phenomena, whether it be in
the social, psychological natural, ethical or any other
field, which seems to be inaccessible then unable to be
satisfied the intrigue sharpens.

In this dissertation we will make a study of two
seemingly irrational phenomena which prick our curiosity
and highten our desire to know about them. These being,
magic and bungled actions in history.

In the first chapter the problem 'as to whether
the seemingly irrational can be amenable in rational terms
or not' poses itself. As this problem is directly related
to the concepts of rationality and explanation, a brief
discussion of these two notions will be looked into.

The second chapter in the philosophy of anthropology
comprises of a discussion on magic; a social phenomena,
which loomed large in the primitive cultures, but traces
of which are found even today, in our present day modern

world. 'Can this seemingly irrational act be explained rationally?' This will be our topic of concern in the second chapter. Various views have been adduced by different social anthropologists. We have made a study of Frazers' theory of magic, Functionalism and Beattie's view that magic is basically symbolic and observe that none can stand on closer scrutiny. PeterWinch has also been brought into account but his arguments also cannot stand in the heat of criticism produced against them. It is the logic of situation that has been able to explain magic satisfactorily.

In the third chapter we will deal with the philosophy of history. The problem selected to be discussed is of yet another seemingly irrational phenomena. These are bungled actions in history; actions which do not attain their coveted goals but end e up , in a muddled up consequence due to the misappraisal of the agent, involved in the problem situation. A few historical explanation presented by different social scientists have been brought into consideration, but those could not successfully explained bungled actions in history, due to their own shortcomings. Bringing into account Watkins' Imperfect Rationality Principle in the context of the logic of situation, we have tried to explain that bungled actions

are not unintelligible.

Thus both irrational phenomena ; magic, in the field of social anthropology, and bungled actions in history can be explained in terms of the logic of situation.

CHAPTER I

THE PROBLEM POSES ITSELF

This dissertation is a conceptual
investigation into the problem which relates partly
to philosophical anthropology and partly to philosophy
of history. Broadly stating, the problem I propose to
probe into is 'whether the seemingly irrational human
behaviour can be amenable in rational terms or not'.
Remote, unsuccessful events in history and apparently
unintelligible practices adopted by the natives of
certain cultures will be our main concern.

This inquiry is confined to the field of
explanation in the social sciences and within that
I shall be dealing chiefly with the problem of
explanation of appearingly irrational social phenomena
into its two different aspects. The selection is not
arbitrary but has been made by force of the fact that
one is a social phenomenon which has its effects on
individuals of that particular society in which it is
prevalent; namely magic. The other an individual
phenomenon the consequences of which grip the whole
human race directly or indirectly, closely or distantly;
namely bungled actions in history.

The foregoing problems will be considered at some length under the ruberic of rationality; a concept in the discussion of which social sciences have been variously but inescapably involved.

Two concepts that play the most seminal role in the development of this dissertation are that of 'rationality' and of 'explanation'. In what follows I shall discuss briefly the two notions.

Rationality is a crucial concept in the social sciences for one of the ways of explaining and predicting the behaviour of individuals and groups.is to exhibit the reasons they have or suppose themselves to have for their behaviour. A first step then in providing this type of explanation and prediction is to clarify the concept of rationality.

The concept of rationality in the social sciences is a confused one, signs of this being that rationality is used in many different senses by social scientists. It has often been taken as the typical difference between what have been termed 'primitive' and 'civilized' societies. Rationality acquires different connotations depending on what it is being opposed to. However, its exact connotation seems to undergo changes in the hands of different authors.

In what follows I shall set out a number of
different definitions given with respect to 'rationality'
In doing so I make no claim to comprehensiveness.

Jonathan Bennett uses rationality, to mean, that
which demarcates human beings from the other species on
the basis of their distinguished intellectual capacity.
His analysis of rationality is to explore the content
of the true belief that human beings are on a certain
intellectual eminence compared with other terrestrial
creatures. As he mentions in his book 'Rationality' this
eminence is surrounded by a logical precipice and not by
a gentle slope, the eminence being essentially connected
with human linguistic ability.

Kant attributes human beings with a full scale
rationality which places them on a higher plane compared
to the rest. It is the capacity for making judgements
or having beliefs, a quality exclusively this own.

Other efforts to present a reasonable picture
of rationality have been made by Jarvie and Agassi.
Thus we are told

By definition a rational action is one based on
... the actors' goals or aims, his present knowledge and
beliefs. 1

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1. Jarvie, I and J. Agassi,(1967) 'The Problems of the
   Rationality of Magic, Rationality Oxford Basil
   Blackwell, edi. Wilson, B. p - 173

In another place Jarvie states his position
more clearly when he says almost in passing and in
parenthesis

(for my part I accept the idea of goal-directedness as
the criteria of rationality). 1

Mullick also brings into account the ends when
she makes the twofold assumption regarding the concept
of rational action. She is of the view

first that all action, all belief is related to some end;
second that it is characterizable as rational or
irrational only in relation to that end. 2

Later a shift in her position is evident when she notes

The claim I do make is that there is a sense in which
the term 'rationality' is currently used which identifies
it with intelligibility-via the notion of the rationale
of doing things, the point of doing them. 3

Martin Hollis makes a strong claim that
anthropology is only possible on the assumption that
all societies are rational in precisely the way of
western rational thought

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1. Jarvie, I:(1964):Revolution in Anthropology
   London, Routledge and Kegan Paul, p-132.

2. Mullick, M : (1975) On the Criteria of Rationality
   Philosophy of the Social Sciences, Vol.5, No.3, p-309.

3. Mullick, M : Rationality Debate in Anthropology : A
   Reassessment. p-4

If anthropology is to be possible... the natives must
share our concepts of truth, coherence and rational
interdependence of beliefs... In other words Western
rational thought is not just one species of rational
thought nor rational thought just one species of thought.[1]

Thus all else as opposed to Western rational thinking

was condemned as irrational.

Stephen Lukes sums up the various definitions

of rationality in a nutshell,

there are... well used senses of 'rational' as applied
to actions such as the widest sense of simply goal
directed action; the sense in which an action is said
to be (maximally) rational if what is in fact the most
efficient means is adopted to achieve a given end; the
sense in which an action is in fact conducive to the
agents' (expressed or unexpressed) 'long term' ends;
the sense in which the agents' ends are ends he ought to
have. [2]

Definitions of rationality can be added adnauseum

as philosophical literature storms with matter on

rationality. One must select almost arbitrarily a point

at which to stop and take a stand.

Generally it is agreed by philosophers that a

rational action is an action based upon the agents' aims

or goals and upon his beliefs and knowledge at the time.

I am inclined towards this generally agreed view but not

totally. After having incorporated an element of

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1. Hollis, M : (1967) The Limits of Irrationality,
   Archives Europeenes de Sociologie VII, p-269.

2. Lukes, S : (1967) Some Problems about Rationality,
   Rationality Oxford, p-208.

critisism to it I will be in complete accord with it.
Thus though goal directedness and conformity with beliefs
and knowledge are necessary conditions for rational action
they are not sufficient by themselves. A degree of
critical consideration of the goals and the means to
attain the goals will make the definition of rationality,
I tend to support, complete. Thus rationality lies in
choosing ones' course of action after a critical
consideration of the knowledge,beliefs and aim in ones
present circumstance. Now the question that poses itself
sharply is 'cannot magic and bungled actions, which are
often side stepped as irrational, be explained as rational
or do they remain unexplained as residues of rational
explanation. This is a crucial question and I shall be
dealing with it in detail in the following chapters.
The problem that strikes us immediately is that of
explanation.

        Stephen Lukes notes,

To explain something is (at least) to overcome an
obstacle. To make what was unintelligible intelligible.
'

And as Dray puts it

The function of an explanation is to resolve puzzlement

of some kind. 2

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1. Lukes, S : (1973) Methodological Individualism
   Reconsidered, <u>The Philosophy of Social Explanation</u>
   edi. Alan Ryan, Oxford, p-126.

2. Dray, W: (1963) The Historical Explanation of Actions
   Reconsidered, <u>Philosophy and History</u>, edi.Sidney Hook
   NewYork, p-117.

He adds to the notion of explanation the idea of
rationality too, and defines rational explanation as

Explanation which tries to establish a connection between
beliefs motives and actions of the indicated sort. 1

Thus when an investigator sets out to resolve his
puzzlement about a human action his problem is usually
that he does not know what reason the agent had for
doing it. To analyse the perplexing actions he seeks
information about what the agent believed to be the facts
of the situation, including the possible results of
taking various courses of action considered open to him
and what he wanted to accomplish: his purposes, goals or
motives. Understanding is achieved when the investigator
can see the reasonableness of mans' doing what this
agent did, given the beliefs and purposes referred to;
his action can then be explained as having been an
appropriate one. A conceptual connection between
understanding the mans' action and its rationale is
brought out.

Thus to explain the phenomena in the world of
our experience is to answer the question 'why' rather
than only the question 'what' which is one of the
foremost objectives of all rational inquiry and especiall

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1. Ibid, p-117.

sociological research, in its various branches, strives to go beyond a mere description of its subject matter by providing an explanation of the phenomena it investigates.

A detailed discussion of explanation in the field of anthropology pertaining to magic and of bungled actions in the field of history will follow in the later chapters.

A wave came in the field of social sciences that its problems should be solved by carrying over the methods and techniques which have produced the celebrated triumphal march of science in the study of the nature and that this procedure will lead to a parallel triumph in our field in the yielding of knowledge. This idea is fallacious bacause the difference between men and non-huma things entails a further difference between the study of men and the study of things. The actions of men as essentially involving thought and purpose, can not be understood by merely observing manifest behaviour. Each man is a unique individual and hence human action cannot be considered as completely subject to the causal uniformities governing the behaviour of matter. Hence the methods and goals of natural science should be deemed in-appropriate to the study of man and society.

Maurice Mandelbaum lays the distinction as

In the first place the concepts and methods utilized in
the natural sciences have been more sharply defined than
have been those which social scientists employ. In the
second place there is less disagreement among natural
scientists than among social scientists as to the purposes
which actually do underlie, or which should underlie their
studies. In the third place the relations among the
various branches of natural science seem to be more easily
definable and less subject to dispute than is the case
among the social sciences. 1

Collingwood too believes in the impossibility of

the science of man. For him any science of human nature

if viewed on the model of natural science is open to two

decisive objections. The first of these arises from his

analysis of human action: every act which men perform, he

asserts, has both an 'outside' and an 'inside' ; an

internal and external dimension. External movements are

physical movements describable by such concepts as duratior

velocity, location and magnitude. But concepts of this

sort hardly supply a complete identification of the action

performed. The internal dimensions comprised of the agent

objectives, beliefs, attitudes and standards of conduct

also demand hearing. According to Collingwood, for the

events with which natural science is concerned

This distinction between ix the outside and inside of an
event does not arise. The events of nature are more event
not the acts of agents whose thought the scientist

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1. Mandelbaun, M : (1973) Societal Facts, Philosophy of
   Social Explanation, Oxford, p-105.

endeavours to trace. 1

Scientific method as developed in chemistry or physics is thus incapable of

penetrating to the inside of events and detecting the thought which they express. 2

Any science of human nature employing this method will likewise be restricted to natural events, events which lack an internal dimension. It will thus alienate itself from what is most distinctive about human agents, and yield an understanding of their conduct which is necessarily and permanently incomplete.

The most fundamental aim of the method of natural science is to discover what ~~Skinner~~ Skinner calls 'Uniformities' and what Mill refers to as 'constant laws' and 'laws of unerring uniformity'. But scientific uniformities or laws, like those connecting the volume, temperature and pressure of gases must have universal scope. They cannot hold merely for England from the reign of Elizabeth I to that of Victoria or for India during the reign of Akbar. On the contrary to be considered as laws

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1. Collingwood, R.G. :(1946) <u>The Idea of History</u>, Oxford University Press, NewYork. *p -210*

2. Ibid, p- *211*

at all they must held for every time and place for any
histerical peried or secial erder. Thus metheds ef
natural science cannet be imperted in secial science fer
any study ef human behaviour. However wide, its scepe,
will never be mere than a generalized descriptien ef
certain phases in human histery and a limited space.
This means that any such study will lack a crucial feature
ef the natural sciences, i.e. universally applicable laws.

Thomas McPhersen netes in his beek 'Secial
Philesephy' that we cannet understand a seciety unless
we understand what peeple in it mean by the cencepts they
use and ne ameunt ef empérical study can tell us this.

Prof. Chemsky argues in his 'Language and Mind'
that the se called behavieural sciences have enly centrived
te mimic the surface features ef the physical sciences;
they can detect the regularities ef eutward behaviour but
cannet acceunt fer its interier legic and erganizatien.

Prof. Winch claims that secial scientists are prene
te misunderstanding their ewn practice; they think wrengly
that the kind ef explanatien they are cencerned te give
are exactly like these which natural scientists are
cencerned te give.

Thus we ceme te realize that between the natural
sciences and the secial sciences there is a difference net
ef degree ef cemplexity but ef kind. The idea ef unifying

the social sciences as one branch of a unified science of nature is in principle mistaken. The notion of human society involves concepts which are logically incompatible with the kind of explanation offered in the natural sciences. Having ruled out the possibility of importing the methods of explanation of natural sciences into social sciences we shall look steadfastly at the wide spectra of explanations offered by different social scientists of human behaviour; behaviour that is

changing, fluid and evanscent. 1

and hence making great demands on the ingenuity of the scientists. How far could the various explanations meet with success in explaining human behaviour that was seemingly irrational will be evident in the two following chapters.

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1. Skinner, B.F.: (1953) Science and Human Behaviour, The Macmillan Company, p-13.

CHAPTER II

RATIONAL EXPLANATION AND MAGIC

Certain primitive Yoruba carry about with them boxes
covered with cowerie shells which they treat with special
regard. When asked what they are doing they apparently
reply that the boxes are their heads or souls and that
they are protecting them against witchcraft. 1

What a practice soaked with an element of

mystery !

A child of eight, dressed in her best excitedly

elbowing in and out of a strangely silent crowd, was

cought held of and corded to her husbands pyre... soon

her bewildered terror-stricken wide eyes and wild heart

rending shrieks were absorbed in the furious galloping

flames.

A cold answer, 'Its the custom,' is flung to

pacify the aghast,'why ?'

Eating ones' enemys' brain or dodging out of the

way of an approaching sister; offering ones' own wife

for the pleasure of the guest; possession of human heads

as status symbols; treating stick or stone as the

embodiment of ones soul and carrying it around; never

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1. Hollis, Martin: (1967) Reason and Ritual, Rationality
   Oxford, p-221.

parting with beloveds lock of hair'; impaling with pins
or melting in fire a wax model of an enemy; sacrificing
human beings to idols.

Strange as they seem to us, what do such ~~as~~ actions amount
to ? What do these seemingly irrational actions imply ?
Question marks looming large close up round the bewildered
on-looker.

An alien society with a culture of its own is
what makes a stranger of one who is away from home. It
includes all those beliefs and expectations about how
people should speak and act which becomes a kind of
second nature as a result of social learning. When one
is with members of a group who share his culture one does
not have to think about it, for they all view the world
in much the same way and all know what to expect of one
another. However, first exposure to an alien society
usually produces a disturbing feeling of disorientation
and helplessness; a state of culture shock. In general
the more exotic the alien society, and the deeper ones'
immersion in its social life, the greater the shock.
Ones' customary catagories of experience are no longer
useful and habitual actions elicit seemingly bizarre
responses.

An anthropologist who sets himself to study a
culture, which is not his own, can hope to succeed when

he understands everything the natives say, do and, believe
In what follows I intend discussing a philosophical
problem stemming out from the practice of anthropologists
and sociologists which may be stated as : 'when one
comes across a magical activity which appears at first
sight to be irrational what attitude should the social
scientist adopt towards it?'

In this chapter in the philosophy of anthropology
I will be dealing chiefly with an anthropological phenomen
namely magic. It is seriously maintained in some
intellectual quarters that magic cannot be understood in
rational terms and that it is irrational. In what follows
I will discuss the problem of its explanation. Can a
rational explanation of magic be given ? If not, must
it be condemned as irrational remaining a residue of
explanation.

The problem of explanation of magic acquires
special significance for the social scientists in view of
the fact that despite its apparent ineffectiveness people
believe and practice it without either noticing its
ineffectiveness or even attempting to test it as they test
their other practical attempts.

Human action is always motivated by some underline
force with some aim in view. Is it just possible that
there is no point in performing the magical activities?
If so then what do these actions signify ?

A host of answers have been provided by
anthropologists and philosophers in respect to primitive
magical beliefs and practices. From Tylor and Frazer to
Evans Pritchard and Beattie anthropologists have been
trying to explain this problem. Functionalism,for example
tried to avoid the possible insult to the prestige of
those who practice magic by announcing the rationale of
magic to lie in its social function. Frazer avoided it
by declaring the practitioners to be doing science though
rather crudely. Beattie lays emphasis on the fact that
magic is essentially symbolic, having its rationale in
the aptness of the symbol to the value symbolized. Thus
different thinkers have given their own accounts.

We begin our discussion with the well known
theory of Sir George Frazer as his account of magic
instigated the later anthropologists to react strongly
against him. Roughly stating,his theory goes like this:
The primitives take to the magical act because they
erroneously believe that,that act will bring about the
coveted effect. Spells are thrown invoking things to
happen, dances of enactment are performed because it is
thought that they have the power of bringing about the
desired results. Magical acts are the consequences of
false beliefs that assume:

...first that by imitating the desired effect you can produce it, and second, that things which have once been in contact can influence each other when they are seperated just as if the contact still persisted. 1

The major components of Frazer's theory are the two laws he propounds about magic. They are (1) the law of similarity or homeopathic magic resting on the idea that 'like produces like' or that 'effect resembles its cause', and (2) the law of contagion or contact magic which is actually imitative of the former. Thus according to Frazer when hunters enact the chase or the warriors the victory, they do it because they believe this will bring about the desired end. Those who practice magic bring into use things that resemble one another. For example, gold in homeopathic magic is a magical cure for jaundice. The contagious magic on the other hand employs things that had once been in contact with the person who is the object of the magical spell. The practitioner uses such things as a bit of hair, a nail clipping, a shred of cloth, or even the dust the individual had trodden on. In both the magics the error is the same; the practitioner in either case is a sufferer from misplaced faith in the association of ideas. The believer considers for instance that with the correct invocation the thought enactment of victory or the thought wish for illness to strike is sufficient to bring about victory or illness.

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1. Frazer, J.G. : (1922) <u>The Golden Bough</u>, Abridged editio Macmillan, London, p-12.

According to Frazer, the misplaced faith, which is the
basic error of the practitioners of magic is not
incidental. Magic is an esstial part of their whole
cosmology; their theory of the universe. Frazer's
account of magic as a complete theory of universe tries
to explain on the one hand,as to why magic has such
widespread appeal and grasp; On the other hand it seems
to make magic more agreeable to the mind of the present
day man by according it the status of a world view similar
to the world view of science. The latter point would be
better appreciated if we consider it in the context of
Frazer's evolutionery account of 'magic-to-xxkxgxxbxxxx
religion-to-science.' According to him,human thought
has evolved from magical stage to the present day scientif
stage through the intermediary stage of religious thought
Each of these stages constitute distinct world views.
The magical stage is,though placed lower to the religious
nevertheless, it has according to Frazer the form similar
to the scientific stage. Religion, he holds, gives free
will to the universe and robs man of his manipulative
power whereas magic like science views the universe as a
system that can be predicted and manipulated.

According to Frazer's reconstruction of the
evolution primitive men, in the beginning, considered the
world as being commanded by mystical forces and his magic

was an attempt to handle them. When that attempt proved
to be futile the resultant disorderliness thrust him to
anthropomorphism, nurturing in him the belief that the
disorder was caused by gods who had to be appeased.
Finally the superstitions and anthropomorphic world views
gave way to a stable conception of the universe supported
by freshly refined and experimented notions of emperical
science. Thus, Frazer holds, that though religion has an
explanatory intent, it is very feeble and logically
defective. He sees magic, religion and science as three
competing systems, one of which is logically defective
(namely religion) while the other is factually defective
(namely magic). Evans Pritchard paraphrases Frazer's
standpoint in his observation

(Frazer) considered that primitive man had reached his
conclusions about the efficacy of magic from rational
observation and deduction in much the same way as men of
science reach their conclusions about natural laws.
Underlying all ritual is a rational process of thought.
The ritual of magic follows from its ideology. It is
true that the deductions of a magician are false- had
they been true they would have been scientific and not
magical- but they are nevertheless based on genuine
observation. For classification of phenomena by the
similarities which exist between them is the procedure
of science as well as of magic and is the first essential
process of human knowledge. Where the magician goes
wrong is in inferring that because things are alike in
one or more respects, they have a mystical link between
them whereas in fact the link is not a real link but an
ideal connection in the mind of the magician... A causal
relationship exists in his mind but not in nature. It
is subjective and not an objective connection. Hence the
savage mistakes an ideal analogy for a real connection. 1

1. Pritchard, E.E. Evans: (1965) The Intellectualist
Interpretation of Magic, Theories of Primitive Religion,
Oxford, p - 63

Thus Frazer regards the fundamental conception of magic to be identical '

...with that of modern science; underlying the whole system is a faith, implicit but real and firm in the order and uniformity of nature. 1

The flaw of magic, however, he further observes,

...lies not in its general assumption of a succession of events determined by law but in its total misconception of the nature of the particular laws which govern that succession. 2

Thus in Frazer's view magical beliefs are largely rational in method purpose and form though unscientific and more or less irrational in content. The underlying criterian of rationality here is approximation to the coherence and predictive powers of natural science.

After an elaboration of Frazer's theory of magic we see that his evolutionary scheme is most unconvincing. Quite often it is seen that magic, religion and science coexist side by side in the same society. This makes it difficult to believe that any one of them has succeeded or preceeded any other. Equally problematic is his idea that though the magical and the scientific world views are similar in their logic yet in their evolutionary sequence, the two are mediated by a world view which is radically different from the two. How can a certain kind

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1. Frazer, J.G. : (1957) p-64.

2. Ibid, p-64.

of thinking having given way in its evolutionary process
to an entirely different kind of thinking reassert itself.
Frazer's evolutionery account is highly conjectural and
unmindful of the conceptual issues relating to it.

Now, to come to his views on magic, which is our
main concern. Frazer does not succeed in showing that
belief in magic is less defensible than belief in science.
Moreover it is not clear that all magic is either
homeopathic or contagious as he seems to have believed.
To provide a theory, explaining why belief in one is more
defensible than belief in the other he would have to take
a somewhat more sophisticated view of scientific thinking.
He simply endorses a naive view of science as an accumulat
mass of empérical observations from which theories have
somehow to be squeezed. A more polished view of science
should have been forwarded by Frazer because so much of
his arguments turns on comparison and contrast between
magic, science and religion.

Tom Settle observes that Frazer's ...

account of rationality of magic may be said to insult
the intelligence of its practitioners. It damns with
faint praise: belief in magic is slightly rational since
magic enjoys slight inductive support I No magic maker...
would welcome, or even allow use of such crterion of
rationality. 1

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1. Settle, Tom : (1971) The Rationality of Science versus
   the Rationality of Magic, Philosophy of Social Science,
   Vol.I, Great Britain, p-183.

Frazer's claim of magic as an inductive device
was meant to be complimentary rather than insulting,
since it proclaimed practitioners of magic to be rational
in the same sense in which scientists and technologists
are rational- only mistaken in their specific hypothesis
of cause and effect. Here the question arises that if
the primitive man practised induction as well as Frazer
claims, how is it that science did not advance in
primitive cultures, if induction is how science advances.
Induction cannot be such a successful guide to truth in
science if it succeeds in fortifying what Frazer regarded
as a set of false and nonsensical beliefs. If induction
explains how such beliefs become fortified then it is
highly doubtful as to whether induction could lead to the
growth of knowledge. By claiming that primitive magic
is soundly based on induction, Frazer makes it impossible
to account for the growth of knowledge in modern science,
which too , according to him, is based on induction. How
does the same method yield.in one case. irrational content
or beliefs and rational beliefs or content in the other.
If induction is indeed used in both kind of cultures, some
other factor must account for their diversity; and it
would be this other factor rather than induction that
should be regarded as crucial to the rationality of
science. Thus if some other element is needed to explain
the difference in rates of growth, it is not a compliment
to declare primitives to be inductivists.

Thus the foregoing discussion on Frazer's theory of magic portrays it as a bold and exciting theory which does not find favour among the present day social scientists.

The functionalists unlike Frazer, consider magic as satisfying certain latent drives and thus performing a stabilizing function in the magic practicing societies.

Malinowski is one of the chief exponents of this doctrine, which largely consists in the functional analysis of culture. By culture, Malinowski means a distinct way of life of a people; something which consist in the unique combination of social organization, religion, language, as economy, polity, art and so on, existing in only one space time area. The functionalist analysis of culture sets out to find the functional relationships between the parts of a whole culture and thence to explain it as a coherent system. It is assumed that every custom, object, idea and belief fulfils some vital function, some task which sustains its continuance as a part of the working whole, that is culture. Clearly the functionalist theory is incompatible with the evolutionary theory of Frazer, for it concerns itself only on illuminating the way one institution is related to, or influences other parts of the system of institutions, Not bringing into account history. In

As Agassi points out

Functionalism is a sociological-anthropological version of relativism; not each to his own faith, but each to his own customs. Each custom functionalism says, should be viewed from within and indeed seen as natural. 1

Ernest Gellner who was basically of the same view sees functionalism in a slightly different light.

The essence of functionalism is perhaps the stress on content (rather than origin or overt motive) in the explanation of overt behaviour. Formulated as an extreme doctrine, it asserts that each social institution is ideally suited to its content. The paradigm of explanation then becomes an account of just how a given institution does ideally fit its content which means presumably just how it serves the survival and stability of the whole better than would any available alternative.

Gellner argues that the rationality found in simple societies and in modern western societies shows considerable convergence. Institutions may be socially effective and powerful precisely for the reason that they are not strictly rational. Even in the advanced societies there is some willingness to credit the non-rational with this type of power. A religious system deals in such power and the religious may not seek analysis of it by purely rational procedures. If the ssociologist were to insist on imposing categories of rationality to judge belief systems, he might from

1. Agassi, J : (1977) <u>Towards a Rational Philosophical Anthropology</u>, Martinus Nijhoff, The Hague, p-266.

2. Gellner, E : (1968) Concepts and Society, <u>Rationality</u> Oxford, p-20.

certain point of view blind himself to the social and psychological operation and the potency of non-rational. Thus Gellner explains the significance of religious and magical beliefs in terms of their psychological power and socially effective function even though they embody statements that are rarely true and exhort conduct which is not by modern standards rational. Concepts are not always rigorous and precise, and do not always carry well defined meanings. They may indeed be important precisely because of the strategic ambiguities that they embrace. Thus functionalism professes that the non-xxrational has a function to perform. Though magic is non-rational yet it has a function to perform.

Criticizing the hermeneutic principle of Evans Pritchard, Gellner notes,

It is worth considering just why the principle is so indiscriminately charitable... The hermeneutic principle tacitly employed by Evans Pritchard is too strong for it ensures that no reasonably viable society can be said to be based on or to uphold absurd or pre-logical doctrines. The trouble with such all-embracing charity is,for one thing, that it is unwittingly quite a priori it may delude anthropologists into thinking that they have found that no society upholds absurd or self-dontradictory beliefs whilst in fact the principle employed has ensured in advance of any inquiry that nothing may count as pre-logical, inconsistent or categorically absurd though it may be. And this apart from anything else would blind one to atleast one socially significant phenomenon: the social role of absurdity. 1

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1. Gellner, E : (1968) , p-36.

Functionalism is thus an approach that studies the 'non-rational' behaviour by reference to the not so irrational 'hidden-hand' by which all things work to sustain each other.

Traditionally, evolutionists and particularly Frazer held that magic is a primitive form of science embodying causal theories and empirical apparatus. Malinowski denies this similarity between magic and science claiming that magic is not primitive science, but rather a system whose function is to strengthen belief and enhance tradition and substantiate morals. 1. Malinowski's argument here is ambiguous for it is not clear how his functional view contradicts with the view that magical myths are primitive science. Primitive science can strengthen belief, substantiate morals and enhance tradition, such effects being part of the social functions of science. Malinowski asserts that magic explains what the natives cannot control. Science too sometimes explains what we cannot control or understand. If so then one simply has to admit that in some respects magic is̶x̶r̶e̶s̶e̶m̶b̶l̶e̶s̶/primitive science, its social function being similar.

Commenting on the functionalist methodological assumption that every part of an organization has a

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1. ⊠ See Malinowski, B : (1929) Social Anthropology, Encyclopaedia Britannica, vol. 20, p.p. 862-70.

certain function to perform. Jarvie observes in his book
Revolution in Anthropology that present day man who stands
at the highest step of the evolutionary ladder has in his
body some non-functional survivals, as for instance the
tailbone and the appendix. Following from this there is
reason to suppose that society which is regarded as living,
metaphorically, also may be containing uneliminated
redundant parts which remain on account of being harmless.
Hence for all we know, there may be some institution
still surviving without any social significance.

Similarly, Joan Smith argues that

functionalism has inherent flaws as either a context of
inquiry or a specific structure of emperical propositions,
so that as a method it is a behavioural impossibility
and, as a theory, it negates the possibility of the
very items of the social world which are addressed by it.

A strongly current alternative is the symbolist
approach , which explains magic by its essential
expressiveness. Its chief exponent is John Beattie.
He is of the view that beliefs associated with ritual
are essentially expressive and symbolic. Magic for him
is the acting out of a situation, the expression of a
desire in symbolic terms. Ritual actions are not either
simply irrational or pseudo-rational, based on pre-
scientific erroneous knowledge, but are of a different

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1. Smith, Joan : (1975) The Failure of Functionalism,
   Philosophy of the Social Sciences, vol.5, No.1, p-33.

character altogether.   Beattie notes,

... the sensible student of myth, magic and religion
will... be well advised to recognise that their tenets
are not scientific propositions, based on experience and
on a belief in the uniformity of nature, and that they
cannot be adequately understood as if they were. Rather,
as symbolic statements, they are to be understood
by a delicate investigation of... the kinds of symbolic
classifications which they imply. 1

For Beattie magic and religion,

... both imply ritual, symbolic ideas and activities
rather than practical 'scientific' ones. 2

Beattie's general theory of beliefs and values

seeks to add an extra dimension to the usual view that

these are factors which affect peoples selection of

means and ends. Beattie puts it down,

It was easy for the Victorian to assume that such
thinking as they did was simple and 'childish'; a very
inferior version of their own. The intensive fieldwork
which was to provide an intimate understanding of
simpler people's way of life and so to demonstrate the
superficiality and inadequacy of such views, had not
begun... so there was no way in which they could have
known better... Only with the development of intensive
fieldwork... the subtlety, complexity and, often
profoundity of the ways of thought of pre-literate
people began to be adequately understood. 3

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1. Beattie, J : (1964) <u>Other Cultures</u>, London, p-72.

2. Ibid, p-212.

3. Ibid, p-67.

Thus for Beattie as opposed to Frazer belief
systems are far from being childish,nor are they as
Benjamin Franklin had asserted savagery or revolting and
sub-human. Beattie notes that Evans Pritchard showed in
his book on Azande that P

... the beliefs of this highly intelligent people... are
not...a set of weird and irrational delusions about occult
for forces, but rather... a mode of adjustment to the
strains and frustrations of everyday life which, in the
whole context of Zande culture, appears as eminently
practical and sensible. 1

Beattie laid the view that in most non-scientific
cultures most thinking about the world is of a symbolic
character. Abstract notions such as power, political
authority etc. are symbolized and hence,notes Beattie that
for the purposes of Social Anthropology, the first thing
is to determine with clarity what we are to mean by the
term symbol. He notes,

symbolism is a kind of language... symbolism is essentially
expressive, it is a way of saying something important,
something which it is impossible or impracticable to say
directly. 2

Beattie gave insistence to the fact that perfectly
intelligible meaning can be read into the symbolism of
magic and hoped that imputation of meaning to magic will

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1. Ibid, p-67.

2. Ibid, p-71.

defend primitive people against Frazer's charge of
backwardness and irrationality.

In his explanation of magic Beattie makes use
of a distinction between 'instrumental' and 'expressive'
aspects of human behaviour. He is of the view that it
is instrumental to grow crops or kill ones' enemy but
expressive while doing so to chant spells or impale
the wax model of enemy with pins or melt it. To the
question as to how are we to identify the symbolic
element in behaviour, Beattie draws a distinction between
'instrumental' and 'expressive' aspects of human behaviour.

Instrumental activity is directed to bringing about
some desired state of affairs; it is oriented towards an
end. Expressive activity is a way of saying or
expressing something; usually some idea or state of
mind. The instrumental aspect of any activity is
understood by seeing what it is aimed at; its expressive
aspect by understanding what is being said. 1

According to Beattie, the rationale for a magical act
does not lie in its supposed effectiveness, but rather
in the appropriateness of the symbol as an expression
of what it is supposed to express. Frazer thought that
people practicing imitative magic do so because they
believe that by imitating a desired effect they can
produce it. Beattie, by contrast, thinks people imitated
desired effects because it is,

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1. Ibid, p-71.

an appropriate way of saying what has to be said. 1

Beattie goes further to assert that often magical
activities are believed to be instrumental (causally
effective) just because they are expressive. But this
is a problematic definition,for Beattie admits,

Although magic _is_ magic because it is essentially
expressive and symbolic the people who use it think of
it as instrumental. 2

Now, since he has identified instrumentality with causal
effectiveness and since he views primitive technology
as causally effective, convincing us that practitioners k
how to learn by trial and error, Beattie gets trapped
in a problem as to how people still believe in magical
practices without being aware of its ineffectiveness or
make an attempt to test it by empirical methods as the
practical techniques are tested. To this Beattie answers
simply that there is no need to do so for magic is
essentially expressive. But neither Beattie nor anyone
else claims that practitioners of magic believe magic to
be essentially expressive. It is the visiting
anthropologist and not the natives who think magic to be
essentially symbolic. The natives who make magic manifes

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1. Ibid, p-204.

2. Ibid, p-204.

do so, because they believe it to be causally effective.
From the practitioners view point then there would be
a point in testing magical techniques empirically, if
their effectiveness were in doubt. But it is not so
except for a few limited cases as in the field of medicine
Besides this another point that strikes is that
expressiveness does not pick out magic from non-magic.
Many non-magical acts are very expressive. As Settle
points out

Body language is often more genuinely expressive of an
emotion or an intention than a spoken utterance. 1

Magic has thus to be distinguished from non-magic in
some other way.

As Jarvie and Agassi have criticised Beattie on his
twofold theory of magic that there cannot be two theories
of rationality, one that applies to instrumental actions
and the other that applies to symbolic actions.2 XX At
this juncture, they say, Beattie has taken advantage of
both. He tries to impress that magic is not a case of
a goal-directed rational action but it is rational on
some other criterion, but on that criteria of rationality
those actions are also proved rational which are goal

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1. Settle, Tom : (1971), p-185.

2. See Jarvie and Agassi (1966) The problem of
   Rationality of Magic, The British Journal of
   Sociology, no.1, 1967. p - 181

directed.

To consider Beattie's equation when applied to
acts regularly observed in different societies such as
celebrating a wedding, standing overnight in a queue,
sowing crops, making canoes and weapons etc. These acts
will be accepted as rational only if they express some
social meaning. Here the absurdity is evident when we
realize that we cannot explain queuing or the sowing
of seeds unless and until their goal is mentioned how
so ever expressive the act may be. Here the question
that poses itself is: does Beattie's readings of social
value into the symbolism of magic sudceed in giving a
rational explanation ofwhy people perform magic ? Is
there a difference between acts whose social meaning is
understood and ones whose social meaning is not ? Beatti
answer to this will be in negative. He is prepared to
see magic as rational even though the participants are
not aware of the significance of what they are doing.
He himself has accepted that the whole society is not
aware of the importance of what they symbolize although
it is likely that ~~thexwholexsocietyxisxnotxaware~~ in most
societies at least some of the actors will be more or
 less aware of some of the social implication of their
ritual institutions. With the two standards of
rationality; instrumental and symbolic it is difficult
to imagine any act as being irrational. If there is a

distinction between understanding and not understanding the social meaning of ones' action then those who do not understand the social meaning of what they are doing must be due to some other misunderstanding. It could be as Jarvie and Agassi exemplify that they

> ... do not perform canoe magic because of the social importance of canoe building but because they think it will help them achieve some end they themselves are not aware of. 1

Even if the symbolist view is true the interpretation of symbolism is entirely arbitrary. Beattie's interpretation of the symbolic thinking of the magician simply involves reading a statement into an act. This is highly problematic. In the West and other more modern societies one is familiar with acts as statements such as a flag semaphore, or the convention of ballet etc. Both conventions are quite arbitrary but their meaning is intentional. There are a few universal gentures such as smiles, tears etc. but even these too cannot be grasped out of context. When actions with consciously intended meanings are difficult to interpret much more problematic is the reading of meaning into actions which are not intentionally meaningful. Hence Beattie's account does not stand on closer scrutiny.

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1. Jarvie and Agassi: (1966), p-63.

As a firm reaction against the view that magic
is irrational has come the theory advocated by Peter
Winch that seemingly irrational belief systems in
primitive societies are to be interpreted as rational.
According to Winch when an observer is faced with
seemingly irrational beliefs in a primitive society, he
should seek contextually given criteria for their
understanding and appraisal. Winch believes that beliefs
that appear to be irrational can be re-interpreted as
rational in the light of the criterion of rationality to
be discovered in the culture in which they operate.
He states,

Judgements are intelligible only relatively to a given
mode of human behaviour governed by its own rules. 1

Winch would agree that anthropologists have
always struggled to make understandable, beliefs, we do not
share i.e. beliefs held by others such as magical beliefs
This involves giving an account of them which satisfies
our scientific cultures' criteria of rationality or
intelligibility. Sometimes we find ourselves studying
beliefs that are not true yet they are believed to be

1. Winch, Peter : (1958) <u>The Idea of a Social Science</u>,
   London, Routledge and Kegan Paul, p-84.

true by the culture we study. Winch would contend that the last sentence is illegitimate, that it cannot be intelligible. In Winch's view the words 'not true' and 'true' either belong to two quite separate universes of discourse; ours and theirs, or they both belong to ours and are not applicable to the beliefs which do not belong to our universe of discourse. But our universe of discourse cannot appraise other universes of discourse or appraise itself as the only true universe of discourse. Reality is built into a universe of discourse and the outcome of a question about it in another cannot be appraised in the first. Winch gives an example from religion what God's reality amounts to can only be seen from the religious tradition in which the concept of God is used. Winch is not here declaring that only the religious can handle and discuss religious concepts, unlike religious people who claim this, Winch nowhere says there is anything to stop the non-believer coming fully to grasp and being able to play the religious language game. It can hardly be a rule of a game that sincerity of belief is required even though display of sincerity may be required in ritual fashion. The ability to properly play it shows the understanding of it

Reality is not what gives language sense. What is real
and what is unreal shows itself in the sense that language
has. 1

For Winch there is no external or objective

reality against which to measure a universe of discourse.

According to him

Understanding is grasping the point or meaning of what
is being done or said. It is closer to the realm of
discourse and to the internal relations that link the
parts of a realm of discourse-use. 2

Assuming that Winch thinks there is an external

reality, discussion about it cannot take place within

the universe of discourse. This is true of the universe

of discourse of science, as well as that of magic.

Science exists in a cultural context outside of which

the actions and statements which constitute it would not

make sense. Those who do not play its game can hardly

appraise its theories or experiments; those who can play

the game cannot use the game to appraise itself. Thus

Winch in a passage, that he himself describes as seminal

to his thesis, notes:

Criteria of logic are not a direct gift of God, but arise
out of and are only intelligible in the context of ways

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1. Ibid, p-8

2. Ibid, p-9.

of living or modes of social life. It follows that one
cannot apply criteria of logic to modes of social life as
such. For instance science is one such mode, and religion
is another; and each has criteria of intelligibility
peculiar to itself. 1

The question arises what stand would Winch adopt

to the question whether modern cultures' physiological

explanation of a mans' death is nearer to the truth or

the Zande magical one. Whereas on the one hand, modern

explanation comes from an open and critical intellectual

system in which ideas about the world are constantly

scrutinized and revised to meet these criticisms, on the

other hand Zande magic is part of a closed and unrevisable

system of beliefs which may have been that way for a long

time. The issue under consideration isnot whether magic

or physiology truely explain the death but whether the

choice between an open and a closed world view can be

rationally aggued. Here Winch's view seems to be that the

question cannot be rationally argued because there are

different standards of rationality embedded in each positic

and we could only decide the issue if one side was allowed

to impose its standards on the other.

Jarvie in his book <u>Concepts and Society</u> disagrees

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1. Ibid, p-100.

with Winch. He holds that there is something like a
community of rationality shared by all men, but recognised
or fostered by different societies in varying degrees.
This rationality consists at the very least in learning
from experience and especially from mistakes. All the
ethnography turns up no people, however primitive, who do
not in some matters learn from their mistakes. The
minimum standard is thus ever present even though seldom
acknowledged. Those unaware of having it could have it
disclosed to them that they possessed it by outsiders,
like white men for instance. Self discovery is also
possible. Their closed system of ideas comes into contact
with another closed system of different ideas. Suddenly
for the first time there is the shock of choice: another
view of the world is possible. Once this is realized, to
accept either becomes difficult, since there could even
be a third or a fourth view also. It would not then be
an unreasonable conclusion to decide that whatever world
view is chosen it had better be held tentatively in case
some better alternative crops up.

Overlap of standards is important because in
overlap may lie the seeds of appraisal and change whereas
Winch's view freezes them with their contemporary
standards unable to appraise and revise them.

There is a large class of serious but curable
cases where traditional practices and modern medicines
come into direct conflict and the former is rejected as
false. It is a matter of empirical fact that in most
parts of the world when this is put to practical test the
population opts for the modern medicine. This may be
because the modern medicines can often propose and then
carry out crucial experiments. This suggests that
standards of rationality have a certain universal
component. Thus the preference for modern medicine for
the primitives is a refutation of Winch's thesis that
a culture accepts its own ideas as true; that it would
be utterly lost and bewildered without them and therefore
cannot judge them against others. Whenever a culture
can adapt itself to new ideas, and implement them into
its way of life Winch's view does not hold.

Winch's whole view presupposses totally separate
ways of life which enable their members to live
untroubled within their system of ideas and brush off
all contact with the rest of the world. Long ago it
might have been the case, now it is not. No culture is
a closed system. Popper's model of the closed society
probably never was actualized and certainly is not now.
And since they are not seamless the possibility for

contrast and self-appraisal always exists. Constant
acquaintance with alternative sets of concepts and ways
of classifying the world tends to shatter a lot of ones
own preconceptions. The bizarre ceases to be bizarre
and a degree of self awareness about ones' own culture
and society is gained which only the greatest of
imaginative leaps can otherwise obtain.

If evaluative standards of different societies
were incommensurable there would be and could be no
social science indeed no history either. After all
history is the attempt to explain the past in terms of
the present. We cannot explain medieval plague without
reference to medieval ideas of disease and hygiene.
In history we, in a way, attempt to explain and evaluate
the beliefs institutions of another time. As one
explores further into the past of ones culture or country
the gap becomes larger between them and us. Yet we do
not stop ourselves at some point and say we cannot
criticize e.g. ~~whi~~ witchcraft, because what its reality
amounts to can be seen only from the tradition in which
the concepts of ~~which~~ witch-craft are prevalent. Similarly
in our contemporary society we may not be able to explain
actions without pointing out the falsity of the beliefs
on which they were based. If we can appraise a past
state of affairs of our own society and segments of our

own society today then we can do it to others also.

All this seems obvious enough yet Winch flies in the face of it. He maintains in his book that understanding a society is a kind of conceptual empathy which imprison one in a universe of discourse that cannot evaluate itself.

Hollis claims

... the only way to produce justifiable accounts of other cultures is to make the natives as rational as possible. 1

From this he concludes that

relativism far from being a due recognition of the scope of empèrical science, makes anthropology theoretically impossible. 2

Ernest Gellner appears to be on the same side as Hollis when he argues that

It is no use... claiming that the indigenous societies always live, as it were, in a conceptual dimension of their own in which our catagorical boundaries do not apply. On the contrary we can sometimes only make sense of the society in question by seeing how the manipulation

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1. Hollis, M : (1967) The Limits of Irrationality, <u>Archives Europeenes de Sociologie</u> VII, p-270.

2. Ibid, p-271.

of concepts and the violation of categorical boundaries helps it to work. 1

MacIntyre also comes close to this view in rejecting Winch's claim. He notes

Explaining actions is explaining choices, and explaining choices is exhibiting why certain criteria define rational behaviour for a given society. To this we must now add that the beginning of an explanation of why certain criteria are taken to be rational in some societies is that they _are_ (italics his) rational. And since this has to enter into our explanation we cannot explain social behaviour independently of our own norms of rationality. 2

Thus we see that Winch's position has generated a great deal of controversy, and after having done so false flat.

After the tedious journey that has been undertaken via the winding routes to inquire conceptually whether magic; the seemingly irrational phenomenon, is amenable in rational terms or not we find ourselves still lost in the puzzling dark alleys with no ray of light to guide us towards an outlet to this problem. Each path that was undertaken to find a way out, did lead us

1. Gellner, E : (1962) Concepts and Society, Rationality Oxford, p - 46

2. MacIntyre, A: (1969) A Mistake About Causality in the Social Sciences, Philosophy, Politics and Society, Oxford, Basil Blackwell. p - 61

convincingly a little way and then stopped short ~~to~~ of
enlighten^(ing) the problem in hand. Thus functionalism
declares the rationale of magic to lie in its social
function, " ....it asserts that each social institution
is ideally suited to its content. " 1. Frazer announces
the practitioners of magic to be doing science though
rather crudely. He considered that "primitive man had
reached his conclusion about the efficacy of magic from
rational observation and deduction in much the same way
as men of science reach their conclusions about natural
laws. 2. Hence he shows them to be rational in method,
purpose and form, though irrational in content. Beattie
insists on magic being essentially symbolic and hence
having its rationale in the appropriateness of the symbol
to the value symbolized. Peter Winch advocated the view
that so called irrational belief systems of primitive
societies can be interpreted as rational in the light of
the criterion of rationality to be discovered in the cultu
in which they occur.

A general survey of the various approaches
discussed abowe has revealed their shortcomings. On my
part I am favourably inclined towards the explanation

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1. Ernest Gellner : (1962) , p-20.

2. Frazer, J.G. : (1922), p-15.

offered in terms of situational logic. This explanation that takes into account the actions, aims, beliefs, knowledge of the situation in which the agent is placed. The problems that strike the social anthropologists can be rationally reconstructed in terms of the situational logic. Much of the fieldwork (as in anthropology) employs situational logic. To quote Jarvie's example

Assume an extremely intelligent Martian scientist had landed in the Bible Belt during a severe drought. While he was being conducted around by a distinguished scientist of earth he noticed that all the people of a town were crowded inside a hot, gloomy building. They alternately fell on their knees muttering to themselves and rose to the feet crying in unison. 'Why', asks the puzzled Martian 'are all these people behaving so pecularly, so irrationally on such a hot day ? Why do they waste their time when their crops are wilting in the fields ? ... Don't they want crops ?

The Earth scientist similes tolerantly and explains that ... they all believe in and act on a theory that the world is the property,and under the exclusive control, of a Divine Being. They think that ultimately the drought is the work of the Divine Being and that the best... way of ending it is to implore it of the Divine Being; it is this they are doing in the building.1

The Martian now sees that the earthlings have intelligible ends (they want crops) and have acted rationally, faced with their situation, where 'their situation' includes their knowledge and beliefs.

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1. Jarvie, I.C. : (1964) <u>The Revolution in Anthropology</u>, London, Routledge & Kegan Paul, p-48.

Thus behaviour that seems to be irrational at first glance can be made perfectly intelligible later without attributing bizarre aims to the actors. The fact that we, with our modern scientific knowledge, can see that the actions prescribed by the explanation of the primitives will not bring about the promised end tells no more about these natives than that their knowledge is inadequate. We call it inadequate because it clashes with the 'rational beliefs of modern science. But the native does not know of modern science and may not even believe it if he came to know about it. It would not be non-rational on his part not to have ever heard the arguments in favour of the scientific explanation. It would though surely be non-rational if, faced with all the arguments and able to appreciate their gravity the primitive still refused to accept that a western scientific explanation was any improvement on his own. Surely there is an element of criticism in magic where there is a choice of medicine. Evans Pritchard reports in his book on Azande that among them when a man wishes to acquire medicines for hunting elephants he makes inquiries to discover which magicians are themselves successful hunters. 1. This suggests that the means to achieve the desired end is chosen critically.

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1. See Pritchard, E.E.Evans : (1937) <u>Witchcraft, Oracles</u>
   <u>and Magic among the Azande</u>, Oxford, p-444.

It also suggests how observations of the workings of
superior medicines, improved farming techniques,
fertilizers etc. may begin to upset a system if a
culture of considerable technology and sophistication were
to impinge on the primitive cultures.

Thus is it surely better not to bring into use
the heavily value loaded term 'irrational' with its
overtones of 'unreasonable' and 'bad'. Perhaps a better
use of rational is to apply it to a purposeful behaviour.
The magical practices in so far as they have a purpose
to perform seem to me to be rational. The position I am
inclined towards is that the ignorance of the savage is
just as rational as civilised knowledge. For the
explanation of human behaviour we should use a model of so
called 'rational action' relative to a given situation.
Action should be explained by means of assumptions about
the actors' knowledge and beliefs including those about
his situation, as well as his aims, from which that
action can be shown to be directed towards the
realization of that aim. Social anthropology may even
be characterized as the attempt to make the behaviour
of alien people intelligible by discovering the underlying
situational logic. The only assumption the field worker
can rely on as he does the reconstruction is that the
behaviour of the people he is among can be rationally

explained and made intelligible by adopting the rationality
principle. Situational logic,then is based on the
rationality principle.

   To keep up with the stand I wish to adopt, I
shall be depending on Jarvie's arguments forwarded in
his book 'Revolution in Anthropology' His view is that
magic and religion are to many people a part of common
sense (common sense being an account of the knowledge,
beliefs, aims in the purview of his information at that
time) As a part of common sense it is reasonable for them
to hold it. If another part of their common sense is an
uncritical attitude towards belief, an acceptance of
the received or traditional ideas, then their belief in
common sense is reinforced and all the more rational.
In our society (modern) superstition and elementary
science are both present but part of our common sense
in our society is the attitude of being critical towards
traditional ideas. Once one becomes critical and
establishes standards of being critical, then it is no
longer reasonable to hold on to the more simple minded
magical and religious beliefs in prayers and spells.
This is the reason why we adopt the modern scientific
attitude rather than magic, say, in the matter of medicine
or farming. At the same time within his common sense
and frame of reference the savage is also being

reasonable. Within both savage and civilised frames of reference it is possible to appraise the system of belief of the other, and a critical attitude towards belief and ideas is a better one far ahead than an uncritial attitude.

Thus, to conclude the way out to explaining human action, such as magic which at first sight seems to be irrational is not to try to explain it in some different way, not to apply different methods to an alien society from those we apply to our own society. Situational logic is the sole rational method of finding our way around in social life.

CHAPTER III

RATIONAL EXPLANATION

and

BUNGLED ACTIONS IN HISTORY

In this chapter which deals chiefly with the philosophy of history my concern, broadly, will be with the problem of the explanation of historical events. The focus of our discussion in this context however will be on bungled,unsuccessful actions in history. The issue here is a methodological one. That is, how the social scientist can study the toughts, utterances and actions of others, the minds of the people of a different historical period.

"What I want" says Mr. Gradgrind in Dicken's <u>Hard Times</u>, "is Facts...Facts alone are wanted in life." 1. First ascertain your facts say the positivists, then draw your conclusions from them.

First get your facts straight then plunge at your peril into the shifting sand of interpretation-that is the ultimate wisdom of the emperical common-sense school of history. 2

notes Carr.

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1. Dickens, Charles : (1949) <u>Hard Times</u>, London, p-2.

2. Carr, E.H.: (1964) <u>What is History ?</u> , NewYork, Alfred A. Knopf, p-7.

But here the question arises: how is one to interpret events that have occurred in the past and complete facts about which are not available ? Analogously, how are bungled actions, which failed to accomplish their aims to be explained ? Can they be explained ?

My major preoccupation, as indicated in initial paragraph is with the last two questions. The discussion in respect of the problem posed in the first question has only a supportive and secondary, though not unimportant role. There are two diametrically opposite standpoints in the context of bungled actions which are of direct relevance to the development of this chapter. We have on the one hand the view associated with Collingwood that bungled actions are not amenable to rational explanation. He is of the view that

We argue back from the solution to the problem. 1

As bungled actions stopped short in achieving their end they were not tractable as rational actions, and hence, were condemned by him as unexplanable. On the other

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1. Collingwood, R.G. : (1944) _An Autobiography_, Harmondsworth, p-50.

hand we have the view associated with a host of thinkers
that bungled actions are indeed amenable to rational
explanation. John Watkins for instance, accepting
~~Popparxk~~ Popper's rationality principle announces

The darker the region the more light may the principle
spread...it...can be used to rationalize irrationality
and failure. 1

Besides the two polar views a number of other
solutions pertaining to the problem of explanation in
history are also discussed. In what follows I shall
bring into light the various controversial solutions
and looking at it with a critical eye decide as to
whether any mne of them drives us at home satisfactorily.

A recent popular writer speaking of the
achievements of science, refers graphically to the
process of the human mind which

rummaging in the ragbag of observed 'facts' selects
pieces, and patterns the relevant observed facts together
rejecting the irrelevant until it has sewn together a
logical and rational quilt of 'knowledge'. 2

In a similar tone, E.H. Carr, a prominent

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1. Watkins, J : (1970) Imperfect Rationality, Explanation
   in the Behavioural Sciences, edi.R. Borger and F.Cioffi
   p-167.

2. Leslie Paul : (1944) The Annihilation of Man, London
   Faber & Faber, p-147.

philosopher of history speaks of the task of a historian.
A historian, according to him, distils from the experience
of the past or from so much of the experience of the past
as is accessible to him, that part which he recognizes
as amenable to rational explanation and interpretation,
and draws from it conclusions which may serve as a guide
to action in the future. In this, thus following Talcott
Parson's idea that history is a 'selective system' Carr
holds, that the historian goes about his job like a
scientist who interests himself with the discovery or
formulation of causal sequences in the context of natural
phenomena. He notes

Just as from the infinite ocean of facts the historian
selects those which are significant for his purpose,
so from the multiplicity of sequences of cause and
effect he extracts those, and only those, which are
historically significant and the standard of historical
significance is his ability to fit them into his pattern
of rational explanation and interpretation. Other
sequences of cause and effect have to be rejected as
accidental... because the sequence itself is irrelevant.
The historian can do nothing with it; it is not
amenable to rational interpretation, and has no meaning
either for the past or the present. 1

Accordingly, Carr distinguishes between rational
and accidental causes. The former as they are potential]
applicable to other countries, other periods and other

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1. Carr, E.H.: (1964), p-138.

conditions, lead to fruitful generalizations and lessons
can be learnd from them; they serve the end of broadening
and deepening our understanding. Accidental causes
according to him cannot be generalized; and, since they
are in the fullest sense of the world unique, they teach
no lessons and lead to no conclusions. Hence he rejects
them as useless. Clearly, Carr brings in a normative
element in his notion of rational explanation. According
to him

...behind the search for causalities there always lies
directly or indirectly ~~research~~ the search for values. 1

He defines the function of history as dual and reciprocal;
that is to promote our understanding of the past in the
light of the present and of the present in the light of
the past.

Carr has given instances of a few accidents which
are a series of events determined by chance, coincidences
and attributable, only to the most casual causes such as
the result of the battle of Actium was due not to the
sort of causes commonly postulated by historians, but to
Antony's infatuation with Cleopatra, the unability of
Bajazet from marching into Central Europe by an attack
of gout, the death of King Alexander of Greece from the

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1. Ibid, p-140.

bite of a pet monkey that touched off a train of events.

Bringing into consideration these instances Carr notes,

...it makes no sense as a general proposition to say
that generals lose battles because they are infatuated
with beautiful queens, or that wars occur because kings
keep pet monkeys... 1

The distinguishing feature of rational

explanation in history, Carr believes is its purposive

character, its usefulness in better organizing our

future conduct. He writes

The faculty of reason is normally exercised for some
purpose...human beings reason to an end. And when we
recognized certain explanations as rational, and other
explanations as not rational, we were, I suggest,
distinguishing between explanations which served some
end and explanations which did not. 2

Anything which like Antony's infatuation with Cleopatra's

nose, fails to contribute to this dual purpose, is from

the point of view of the historian dead and barren.

Carr does not raise the issue of the explanation

of the bungled or failed actions of the past. However,

considering his account of the nature of historical

explanation, he is likely to adopt, it seems to me, a

negative stance that such actions are not explainable.

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1. Ibid, p-138.

2. Ibid, p-140.

For if historical explanations, as Carr conceives, are causal in nature then unsuccessful actions pose unsurmount- able problem in as much as their intended goal (effect) is not given to the historian. Study of causal sequence proceeds from effect to the cause but how would the historian get to know the objective of a failed action. The problem in the explanation of unsuccessful action is, first and foremost, the problem of determining or identifying the objective which they (unsuccessful actions are actually meant to achieve but fail to achieve. Methodologically, Carr appears to be illequipped with this issue. In a way unsuccessful actions are like what Carr calls accidents in history, not helping much in the promotion of human understanding. Accordingly they are to be shrugged of as unamenable to rational explanation or as making no sense.

R.G. Collingwood an eminent British thinker, who too believes that unsuccessful or bungled actions of the past cannot be rationally explained, addresses the issue directly and focuses his attention to a conceptual aspect of the problem. Unsuccessful actions of the past are not amenable to any explanation precisely because they are unsuccessful. His argument is that since each action is an attempt to solve a certain problem that arises in a specific situation, a historian can explain

a past action only by the

renactment of past thought. 1

This is possible only if he is aware as to what problem
it was meant to solve and the problem can be known only

by arguing back from the solution. 2

In the case of unsuccessful action a reconstruction of
the problem situation is not possible. Being a failed
action, there is no way of knowing what problem it was
meant to solve, what goal it was meant to achieve. Such
actions, therefore, according to him, are not rationally
explainable. To reproduce Watkins formulation of
Collingwood's argument in this regard;

(1) Every action is an attempt to solve a definite
    problem that has arisen in a definite situation.

(2) A historian can explain a past action only if he
    knows what problem it was intended to solve.

(3) A historian can come to know what problem a past
    action was intended to solve only by arguing back
    from the solution. 3

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1. Collingwood, R.G.: (1946) The Idea of History, London,
   Oxford, University Press, p- 315

2. Collingwood, R.G.: (1944), p-8.

3. Watkins, J : (1970) Explanation in the Behavioural
   Sciences, p-168.

Thus in his book <u>An Autobiography</u> Collingwood writes,

How can we discover what the tactical problem was that
Nelson set himself at Trafalgar ? Only by studying the
tactics he pursued in battle. We argue back from the
solution to the problem. What else could we do. Even
if we had the original type script of the coded orders
issued by wireless to his captains a few hours before
the battle began, this would not tell us that he had
not changed his mind at the last moment, extemporised
a new plan on seeing some new factors in the situation.
Naval historians think it worthwhile to argue about
Nelson's tactical plan at Trafalgar because he won the
battle. It is not worthwhile arguing about Villeneuve's
plan. He did not succeed in carrying it out and
therefore no one will ever know what it was. [1]

The question arises how is then man to fulfil

his quest, his insatiable intellectual curiosity, his

deep concern to know the world he lives in and to

understand and explain the unending flow of events it

presents.

Collingwood's point of view is most disagreeable

because he excludes the possibility of independent

evidence about what the problem was. As Watkins puts

it forcefully,

Why on earth did Collingwood suppose that the only way
to recover a problem is via its solution ? [2]

1. Collingwood, R.G.:(1944) , p.p.-50-51.

2. Watkins, J : (1970), p-169.

Collingwood's argument appears to backlash, for
the difficulty that Collingwood points to, by suggesting
that Nelson could have changed his mind even after having
transmitted orders to his Captains, could arise even in
the case of 'successful actions' for even in their context
one could not be certain that the agent had not in fact
changed his mind. And therefore what he succeeded in
achieving was quite different from what he actually aimed
at. This would mean that if Collingwood's argument is
accepted then not only 'unsuccessful' actions cannot be
rationally explained but even 'successful' actions cannot
be explained. One cannot be sure of their being
successful actions.

The two chief fields in which Collingwood worked
were archaeology and history of ideas and it is true that
an archaeologist usually has no documentary evidence.
If he is trying to interpret the remains of some physical
artifact he is likely to conjecture what its purpose was
and what problem it designed to solve chiefly, on the bases
of evidence supplied by the thing itself. A realistic
conjecture is likely to be made only if the thing was well
designed for its purpose. Thus archaeologists in their
interpretations of the remains of artifacts have to assume
that these constitute good answers to the problems they

were intended to meet. And this may have bent
Collingwood towards the fact that problems past actions
were supposed to solve can be known only by arguing back
from the solution.

But an artifact that was well designed and
constructed does not imply that it was successful. To
borrow Watkin's example,

The Maginot Line was, I presume, well enough designed
and constructed, engineering-wise, to enable an
archaeologist of the future to guess its purpose.
Collingwood's understanding of the Roman Wall was no
doubt shrewd and realistic. But this ... does not
imply that the Roman Wall successfully fulfilled its
larger purpose : perhaps it was as unsuccessful as the
Maginot Line. 1

Now to comment on Collingwood's work on the
history of ideas. Collingwood claimed that as a
philosopher of the past was writing for people who were
already asking the question that he was trying to answer
and so he did not spell out the question in his writings.
The student has to infer the problem from the solution
of it that he is studying. Moreover Collingwood insisted
he will be able to do this only if the solution in a
philosophical work was successful. He was of the view
that if a philosopher made,

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1. Watkins, J : Imperfect Rationality, (1970), p-169-170.

a complete mess of the job of solving his problem, he was bound at the same time to mix up his tracks so completely that no leader could see quite clearly what the problem had been... The fact that we can identify his problem is proof that he was solved it; for we know what the problem was by arguing back from the solution. 1

Collingwood usually speaks as though a philosopher addresses himself to one specific question at a time. But normally it is not the case that a philosopher faces just one outlined problem at a time. A philosopher may have been working within a developing problem-situation. At any one time he may have been distinctly aware of some of its chief features, vaguely aware of others and absolutely unaware of yet others. Hence, to gain a historical understanding of this philosopher's thought, a problem situation would have to be reconstructed and this can be done by a method of successive approximations. In this process though the philosophers own writings will provide important evidence, there will be more evidence outside his writings also.

A historian has certain advantages over the man whose problem situation he is trying to reconstruct. Though his distance from the intellectual scene may lead him to miss things yet with the benefit of hindsight he

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1. Collingwood, R.G.:(1944) , p-50.

may be able to recognize difficulties in the hero's problem situation which the hero did not perceive. And his capacity to enlighten the difference between the objective problem-situation and his hero's subjective appraisal of it may enable the historian to explain, how his hero came to accept, what was actually an improper solution which had to be discarded later. Thus the possibility of explaining unsuccessful actions is not closed as Collingwood had advocated.

Alan Donagan notes in his 'Comment' on Watkin's paper 'Imperfect Rationality' that

As an alternative to the passimistic view of Collingwood's Autobiography Watkins, advocates what he calls an ~~autobiography~~ 'Imperfect Rationality' principle. 1

Watkins frames out the inconsistences in Collingwood's arguments by noting

Indeed, his solution is, strictly speaking incoherent..
if one cannot understand ~~sxxp~~ a philosophical work
unless one knows what problem it was a solution, and
if one could come to know this only <u>from</u> an understanding
of that solution then one could never get started. 2

Before going on to discuss Watkins stand in

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1. Donagan Alan :(1970) 'Comment' on 'Imperfect Rationality by Watkins, p-219.

2. Watkins, J :(1970), p-171.

detail we will look into some other views with regard to
the nature of historical explanation. Although most of
these views do not directly address themselves to the
issue of the explanation of bungled and unsuccessful
actions, their discussion nevertheless should contribute
to an understanding of the issue.

According to a currently fashionable model-namely
the hypothetico-deductive model, explanations given in
all fields of inquiry including history have a common
logical structure. Explanation it is said consists of
the subsumption of what is to be explained under general
laws. In Prof. Carl Hempel's words

...the assertion that a set of events-say of the kinds C_1,
C_2, C_3,.. C_n have caused the event (E) to be explained
amounts to the statement that according to certain
general laws, a set of events of the kinds mentioned
is regularly accompanied by an event of kind (E). [1]

This theory of explanation does not provide
a satisfactory analysis of the kinds of answers
historians usually offer to 'why' and 'how' questions.
Previously questions as to the 'what' and 'why' of the

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1. Hempel, Carl : (1965) Explanatory Incompleteness,
   Readings in the Philosophy of Social Sciences,
   ed. May Broadbeck, p-398.

empirical world were often answered by myths; and to
some extent this is so even in our times. But gradually
the myths are displaced by the concepts, hypothesis and
theories developed in the various branches of empirical
science, including the natural sciences, psychological and
sociological as well as the historical inquiry.

Whereas, in a natural science, we consider it
reliable to put confidence in general propositions or
laws than in specific phenomenon, this rule does not
seem to operate successfully in history and the social
sciences. The efficacy of the hypothetical deductive
model in explaining social action is extremely doubtful
for the reasons already discussed in the first chapter.
Its application in the study of actions done in the past,
including ones that have been unsuccessful, is even more
so.

When a historian sets out to explain a historical
action, his problem is usually that he does not know
what reasons the agent applied. One model of explanation
that is quite considerable in the explanation of an action
in terms of the underlying rationale, which includes,
in particular the ends the agent sought to attain and
the alternative courses of action he believed to be open

to him and their probable efficacy as well as potential
difficulties.i

This procedure becomes clear in the translation
from the indulgence of the Cross to the institution of
the jubilee indulgence,

...in the course of the thirteenth century the idea of
a Crusade more and more lost its power over mens spirits.
If the Pope would keep open the important source of
income which the indulgence represented they must invent
new motives to attract people to the purchase of
indulgences. It is the merit of Boniface VIII to have
recognized this clearly. By creating the jubilee
indulgence in 1300 he assured the species a further long
development most welcome to the Papal finances. 1

This passage clearly explains the establishment
of the first jubilee indulgence by suggesting the reasons
for which Boniface VIII took this step. If properly
configurated these reasons would include not only
Boniface's objective of ensuring a continuation of the
income so far derived from the indulgence of the Cross,
but also his estimate of the relevant empirical e
circumstances including the different courses of action
open to hi, and their probable efficacy as well as
potential difficulties in pursuing them and adverse

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1. Boehmer, H : (1930) Luther and the Reformation
   Translated by E.S.G. Potter, London, p-91.

consequenses to which they might lead.

Various reasons have been adduced in support
of this view. For instance,Dray sets forth an important
type of historical explanation which he calls 'rational
explanation' i.e.

Explanation which displays the rationale of what was
done. 1

Or rather in other words,

... a reconstruction of the agents calculation of means
to be adopted towards his chosen end in the light of
the circumstances in which he found himself. 2

The object of rational explanation is not to subsume

the explanandum under general laws, but

to show that what was done was the thing to have been
done for the reasons given, rather than merely the
thing that is done on such occasions, perhaps in
accordance with certain laws. 3

Hence a rational explanation has

an element of approval in it: it must exhibit what was
done as appropriate or justified. 4

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(1,2,3,4). Dray, William : (1957) Laws and Explanation
           in History, Oxford, Chapter V,

Accordingly Dray conceives a rational explanation (mention of which has been briefly made in ~~thxxix~~ Chapter 1) as being based on a standard of appropriateness or of rationality of a special kind which he calls a 'principle of action' i.e. a judgement of the form : when in a situation of type C_1, C_2 ...C_n the thing to do is X. Dray's conception of a rational explanation thus answers a question of the form 'why did the agent A do X ?' by offering an explanans of the type :

A was in a situation of type C
In a situation of type C the appropriate thing to do is X.

Our concern here is to see whether or not this model can be used in the understanding of bungled or unsuccessful actions. Since the objective of the action in the context of unsuccessful actions itself is not known exactly, the appropriateness of an unsuccessful action in no way can be decided, because though it shows what the appropriate thing to do was yet it does not explain A's having in fact done X and hence the action remains unexplained. In any adequate explanation of an empirical phenomenon the explanans must provide good grounds for believing or asserting that the explanandum

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1. Dray, William : (1957),

phenomenon did in fact occur. This requirement is not
met by a rational explanation as concerned by Dray for
it does not explain what it is meant to explain i.e.
that which has actually been done.

Carl Hempel goes a step ahead and modifies the
form of the explanans. According to him to explain why
A did X

...we have to refer to the underlying rationale not by
means of a normative principle of action, but by
descriptive statements to the effect that, at the time in
question... A had the disposition to act rationally;
and that a rational agent, when in circumstances of
kind C will always ... do X. 1

According to Hempel even if it be conceded
that it would be reasonable to do what the agent did,
given that he had certain beliefs and purposes, it
does not follow that the agent acted reasonably. He
may have done what he did as a result of thinking which
was slip shod or even logically absurd. Hence Hempel
argued that a Dravian 'rational explanation' requires
a further assumption : that the agent was rational when
he acted.

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1. Hempel, Carl : (1962) Explanation in Science and In
   History, Frontiers of Science and Philosophy,
   Pittsburgh, edi. R.G. Colodny, p-29.

If Hempel is right the full schema of the Dravian rational explanation would be as Hempel himself arranges it

A was in a situation of type C
A was a rational agent
In a situation of type C a rational agent will do X
_____
Therefore, A did X . 1

Despite the addition of the premiss that the agent is a rational agent, Hempelian revision can in no way throw any light on unsuccessful actions, for the same reason that the problem with regard to unsuccessful actions is precisely the problem of identifying the purpose or goal of that action. There is no criterion of rationality which uniquely singles out one course of action as 'the thing to do'. There are a several other courses of action open to the agent in the same set of circumstances and he is at liberty to choose any . Besides there is no reason to believe that all historical agents are rational in any of the several senses of 'rational' that may be proposed. Hence this model too cannot be sensibly applied to unsuccessful actions.

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1. Hempel, C.G. :(1962) Rational Action, Proceedings and Addresses of the American Philosophical Association, Vol. XXXV, p-12.

Popper throws light on a new possibility altogether. He has drawn attention to the kind of explanation historians often succeed in establishing. He announces,

Our actions are to a very large extent explicable in terms of the situation in which they occur. 1

He however adds

They are never fully explicable in terms of the situation alone; an explanation of the way in which a man, when crossing a street, dodges the cars which move on it may go beyond the situation, and may fefer to his motives, to an instinct of self-preservation, or to his wish to avoid pain, etc. But this psycological part of the explanation is very often trivial, as compared with the detailed determination of his action by what we may call the logic of the situation. 2

While what Popper calls the psychological part of such explanations às often trivial, I would give great significance to it and not call it trivial in the sense, as Popper has done so, as 'unimportant' and 'obvious'. The information that a man in traffic seeks to avoid injury and act to commit suicide is indispensable, even if it is often obvious in explaining the way he moves.

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1. Popper, K.R. :(1957) <u>The Open Society and its Enemies</u>, 3rd edition, London, p-17

2. Ibid, p- 18

The psychological part of any explanation contains no covering law and is not based on any universal hypothesis whatever, in this way being unique as an explanation of the social sciences. The information that this man seeks to avoid injury or that man to commit suicide, or yet another to sustain a minor injury in order to obtain damages, is in no case a universal hypothesis. Thus, though I abide by Popper's method of situational logic I do not accept his thesis of universal laws, which unifies the two sciences.

~~would be in a confined space of emotions and passions or~~
~~by such opportunity if he were to compare with the only~~
~~emotions he may appeared in understanding some problem.~~

Popper uses rationalism in order to indicate
roughly an attitude that seeks to solve as many problems
as possible by an appeal to reason, i.e. to clear
thought and experience, rather than by an appeal to
emotions and passions. It is a practical attitude of
readings to listen to critical arguments and to learn
from experience. It is basically an attitude of admitting
that

> I may be wrong and you may be right and by an effort
> we may get nearer to the truth. 1

In his article 'Rationality and the Status of
the Rationality Principle', Popper gives a lucid
elaboration of 'Rationality' as

> a personal attitude of readiness to correct ones' belief.
> In its intellectually most highly developed form it is
> the readiness to discuss ones' beliefs critically and
> to correct them in the light of critical discussions
> with other people. 2

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1. Popper, K.R.:(1957) Open Society and its Enemies, vol.II
   p-225.

2. Popper, K.R.: Rationality and the Status of Rationality
   Principle (unpublished)

Tom Settle comes ~~from~~ close to Popper's view on rationality when he says in his article 'The Rationality of Magic versus the Rationality of Science', that it is a critical attitude. According to him, being rational is having ones decisions and actions which are based on his knowledge and beliefs directed towards specific goals only after a critical consideration.

Popper defines his rationality principle as a

minimum principle (since it assumes no more than the adequacy of our actions to our problem-situations as we see them) which animates almost all our explanatory situational modes, and which, although we know that it is not true, we have some reason to regard as a good approximation. 1

Karl Popper's most powerful yet simple philosophical ideas is the notion of the logic of the situation with the help of which one can sort out a great many issues in the methodology of the social sciences. The idea is that

situational logic is the explanation of human behaviour as an attempt to achieve goals or aims within limited means. 2

A man for the purposes of the social sciences

1. Popper, K.R.: Rationality and the Status of Rationality Principle

2. Jarvie : (1972) Concepts and Society, Routledge & Kegan Paul, London and Boston, p-5.

can be viewed as in pursuit of certain goals or aims,
within a framework of social, psychological, natural and
ethical circumstances. These circumstances constitute
both means of achieving his aims and constraints on
those achievements. A mans appraisal of how he can
achieve his aims within these circumstances might be
called sorting out the logic of the situation. He is
in 'logic' because he tries to find out the best and
most effective means within the situation, to realize
his aims. It is assumed that the situation if objectively
appraised should favour certain means which are more
effective than others and that the measure of rationality
consists in the success in approaching such an 'objective'
appraisal. Under situational analysis typical situationa
elements such as 'aims' and 'knowledge' are brought
under consideration and an assumption is made that the
various persons or agents involved act adequately or
appropriately: that is to say in accordance with the
situation. The term situation, already contains all the
relevant aims and all the available relevant knowledge,
especially that of possible means for realizing these
aims.

Popper regards the principle of adequacy of actio

as an integral part for every or nearly every testable
social theory. But here the question arises as to how
can the principle of adequacy of action be applied to
inadequate actions. To quote Popper's own example,
Churchil in 'The World Crisis' said that

wars are not won but only lost-that in effect they are
competitions in incompetence. 1

This provides us with a situation which is not animated
by the rationality principle of adequacy of our actions
but by a principle of inadequacy.

Popper claims that in order to understand
inadequate actions

We have to reconstruct a wider view of the situation
than their own. 2

This should be done in such a manner that we may be able
to perceive how and why they saw the situation as they
did

with their limited experience, their limited or overblown
aims, their limited or overexcited imagination. 3

Thus by hind sight and applying the Rationality Principle
the principle of adequacy of action, unsuccessful,

(1,2,3). Popper, K.R.: Rationality and the Status of
        the Rationality Principle.

bungled or inadequate actions can be explained.

At this point it will be most appropriate and useful to introduce a variant of Popper's Rationality Principle, namely 'the imperfect rationality principle' which has been advanced and defended by John Watkins and which I am inclined to accept. This principle is specifically put forward by its author to account for those unsuccessful or seemingly irrational even crazy actions in which the history of mankind abounds and which are far more challenging from the viewpoint of explanation than the staid and orderly actions of 'normal' people.

Watkins strongly disaggees with Collingwood for according to him the 'irrational' is amenable in rational terms. Advocating the rationality principle Watkins says,

I hold that a rationality principle is likely to be at its most heuristically fruitful when it is applied determinedly to recalcitrant cases-to actions that are manifestly unsuccessful and seem more or less irrational or even downright crazy. 1

He goes to the extent of saying that,

The darker the region the more light may the principle spread. 2

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1. Watkins, J : (1970), p-167.

2. Ibid, p-167.

He claims it can be used to rationalize irrationality and failure.

To elaborate on Watkins methodological device, The rationality principle says that when an individual is placed in a certain objective problem situation he has certain aims, wants, preferences and he draws factual estimate (which may even be a false estimate) of his problem situation and then acts in a way that is 'appropriate' to his aims and the appraisal of the situatio

There is a pure or extreme version of the principle that identifies rational decision making with optimal decisional making; a decision which could not be bettered and any other alternative was to it would be less good. However, Watkins does not favour the optimal decisio making. It involves, according to him, outrageously optimistic assumptions about our capacity for self-knowledge, especially when risks and uncertainities are introduced. Thus it does not serve even as a normative principle.

By 'decision scheme' Watkins means

a set of all those considerations, whether consciously formulated or not, that enter into a particular piece of decision making. 1

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1. Ibid, p-206.

He says further,

it should consist of a complete specification of the
possible outcomes, a complete preference-map or a
complete allocation of pay of values to the outcomes, and
(where appropriate) a comprehensive apparatus for dealing
with risks and uncertainties. 1

The actual decision scheme is fragmentary as

compared with the ideal. But the agent will usually

reduce and simplify it further as he proceeds towards a

decision.   Instead of a complete enumeration of

possibilities demanded by normative theory, we pick out

a few interesting possibilities in the given problem

situation.   In this respect, therefore, it is exaggerated.

As Watkins notes

An actual decision scheme, then, is something like a
crude caricature, drawn with a few bold strokes, of
the complete situational picture and preference map of
normative decision-theory. 2

But, Watkins also points out that a few decisions are

made so rapidly that there is hardly time for the decision

maker to articulate to himself even a part of his decision

scheme let alone the complete decision scheme.   Moreover,

it is even logically impossible that a decision scheme

should be fully articulated, for every proposition has

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1. Ibid, p-206.

2. Ibid, p-208.

several logical consequences. This also means that a
decision scheme has many unnoticed implications and if a
decision maker overlooks a serious implication in the
decision scheme he goes astray from a very different
practical conclusion. X

Now, as a matter of psychological fact, we are
more curious about unsuccessful actions rather than
successful actions. Watkins is of the view that the
simplest way to provide explanation to an action ending
in failure would be that, the main components of the
agent's decision scheme have been ascertained to the
historians satisfaction; these point pretty unambiguously
to a certain practical conclusion; the action in
question was in line with that conclusion; but there is
a significant discrepancy between the situational appraisa
contained in the agents decision scheme and the agent's
objective problem situation (both as reconstructed by the
historian) and the failure of the action can be explained
in terms of this discrepancy.

To augment his position, Watkins applies the
imperfect rationality principle to study the case, where
the principal actor died during the performance, and left
no direct testimony of any kind. This is the case of

the British Vice Admiral Tryon who in 1893,ordered two
parallel columns of ships to turn in on each, even
though they were so close that they made collusion in-
evitable unless one column turned inside the other.
A collusion occured despite the quering of the order
by the leading ship in the other column, and the
Admiral went down with his ship having signalled that
rescue boats were not to be launched by the other ships.
Until recently Tryon's behaviour at the climax of a
brilliant career, had been regarded as inexplicable,
mad or drunken. Watkins, however, basing himself on
Hough,shows how if the attempt is made to reconstruct
the problem situation as Tryon saw it, and as it
developed step by step, his planned manoeuvere is easily
explained, as are his orders about the boats and his
last comment "it was all my fault." The story seems to
be this that the two lines of ships were approaching
shallow water. Tryon ordered the inward turns and
that the order of the fleet be preserved. This latter
implied that the columns were to turn one inside the
other. But which ? The rule of the road at sea is
that ships pass port side to port side. After
hesitating and querying the order Rear-Admiral Markham
leading his column in H.M.S. Camperdown executed hard-
a-starboard trying to turn inside Tryon's column

according to the rule of the road instead of outside, as he should have, when he saw Tryon had the Victoria hard-a-port since it was a Queen's regulation that in cullusion situation, the ship which has the other on her starboard side is to make the avoidance manoevuvere despite the attempts to manoevuvere Camperdown rammed Victoria. Tryon then apparantly tried to run his ship aground, for when it suddenly sank, the engine were going full tilt, causing further loss of life but explaining why he ordered no boats lowered. But if Tryon was waiting for the other column to turn wide before beginning his own hard turn inside them their incompetence was to blame. Why then did he say 'It was all my fault ?' His apparent acceptance of responsibility. Watkins agrees is a classic case of an officer taking responsibility for the error of a subordinate. Watkins sums all up by saying that here was a clear attempt to achieve something which failed, and yet which is entirely satisfactorily explained without adhoc hypothesis of sudden madness or undetectable drunkness.

But how are those gues actions to be interpreted, one may ask, which not only ended in failure but the main components of which as understood by the historian did not point to a desired practical conclusion.

corresponding to the action in question. How are those

actions to be understood which seem not just unsuccessful

but downright irrational and crazy. To this Watkins

answers

Our imperfect rationality principle enjoins the
historian not to throw up his hands and declare that
the agent must have taken leave of his senses... the
historian would try to transform a case of this sort
into a case of a previous sort where the agent though
frustrated or defeated by objective factors, acted
reasonably enough given his misappraisal of his
situation.[1]

Watkins conceeds that by

the kind of methodological rule I was adumbrating...
he succeeded in rationalizing... irrational seeming
affair.[2]

Often a view was set out that history of ideas, is

a caricature of its own rational reconstruction. Rational

reconstruction of the history of ideas, according to them

signifies more than the real history as it is the essence

of history, very different from reality and almost a

distortion of reality. To this Imre Lakatos observes that

rational reconstruction should not be over thrown for it

condones that distortion. Historians of ideas ignore

blind alleys and pass, quickly over dull periods and

center on exciting ones and get'instant rationality'.

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1.   Ibid, p.210.

2.   Ibid, p.215.

This is justified since thinkers work hard in order
to achieve, just the very rational story that the one
who reconstructs it is after. It is a fact that
intellectual autobiographies are usually more reconstructed
than intellectual biographies and one can hardly call
this lies. Thus Lakatos justifies rational reconstruction
and in effect fortifies Watkins position in this regard.

Hence to conclude we find that Watkins has
presented a workable solution which satisfies our
curiosity to know phenomena which at first sight seems to
be irrational. Such a reconstruction, as Watkins himself
significantly observes, is not only historically enlightening
but humanizing as well.

(The example of sea-battle has been taken from John
Watkins' paper Imperfect Rationality, who in turn has
taken it from Admirals in Collussion by Richard Hough.)

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